

The Truth About Shadows

by Illisandria Carthain

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Summary: Shadows of the past are captured in parchment and ink, trapped as I once was. I, the last Shadow of the Great Father since Her descent, will tell the story of my fall and my rise to glory and the glory of my bond-brother.

1. Tales of the Universe

Once upon a time, for this is how all tales start, there was a young Draconis named Tiamat.

Tales such as this one have been sung for generations by my people. In fact, my own Birthing Mother was a skald, one who sang of the past and future. Were it not for Her, her songs of our history would still echo in the Singing Caves in the Home of Our Ancestors.

Unfortunately, She did come and now I am the last of my race, of the pure Guards. But I, too, have a story to sing; one of loss and gain, of love and hate, of strength found in the darkest of times, and one of changing the Universe's design.

Nothing is impossible here. Nothing is untouched and nothing is sacred.

Here there be dragons.

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It was a calm night when She sent us out, Her warning still ringing in my skull even after we arrived at the Hideout of Our Enemies. _**I have things planned for you, Sharp Fang of His Blinking Eye, dark and terrible things that you are powerless to stop. Tremble at your impotence and your insecurity. Feel fear again, you smell so delicious when you're afraid. And make sure they die beautifully, those Skenndar._** She was insane and cruel! And yet, of my own volition here I was, following Her orders to command a Murder of Draconis and raid the Hideout. Was I as bad as Her?

My Murder was pretty normal by raiding standards: three Boulders of Boneheads, one Quill of Prickers, half a Prowl of Those Who Speak Twice, thirteen-or-so Clouds of Snip-snaps, myself, and two Ones Who Cloak Themselves in His Colours. Overall, a pretty satisfactory Murder if I were concentrating on the raid. Which I wasn't.

No, I was far too busy worrying about what plans She had for this Murder as I watched the younger of the two Cloaks clumsily order around the other Draconis. She had plans to kill off every Draconis here, more or less, simply for rebellion or memory of the Old Times. The Snip-snaps were here because they were expendable at best to Her.

Cruelty was Her specialty, to be as unforgiving as the winter snow and as volatile as the ocean. She wore Her madness for everyone to see; unfortunately most of the Draconis who still visited the Home of Our Ancestors chose not to believe their eyes, instead relying on their Mind's Eye, which was being clouded by Her Control.

Foolish, pitiful Draconis.

I watched as the younger Cloak roared at the Boneheads for not listening to him. Folly and a waste of his breath, Boneheads were named that for a reason, a blend of Attacker and Scout making for a low intelligence.

As this was going on, the older Cloak looked at me and smiled, "Et va an sangris? Trell drest an sangris, dyeh?"

I stiffened, not too many of the younger generation, those born under Her reign, knew Old Tongue. How did this Cloak know it?! Even my Old Tongue was weak from disuse and I was the smallest and youngest of my Birth-Brothers.

And, I had to bitterly remind myself, I couldn't speak it very well to begin with because there were no Elders of First Speakers to teach me after She woke.

"Trell drest an sangris?!" One of the older Boneheads lumbered past the young Cloak and growled at the older one. "Davyet an sangris, trell drest dashtek sangris. Baern drest daln drevyek sangris." The old one scoffed and turned away, "Sandyen travek Claek."

From what I could gather, the Bonehead was angry at the Cloak's choice of phrase. "For the glory of blood." It had set the old one off and he insisted that, in the past, the "glory of blood" was not used to motivate senseless murder, but to promise a good afterlife with the Great Father. Then he proceeded to say that children didn't know the "glory of blood" and that the Cloak was stupid and needed to keep his fool snout shut.

Loosely translated, of course.

The elder Cloak shrugged his massive fore-haunches and snorted a small stream of liquid fire. "Can't blame someone for trying."

"How do you know Old Tongue?" I needed to know if there was someone like me out there, someone who remembered their cub-hood and the time before Her.

"Ah," a smug look appeared on the Cloak's snout as he sat back on his hind legs, "Great Mother insisted that certain cubs learn Old Tongue so that we would be able to sniff out traitors and derelict old ones." He shrugged his fore-haunches again, "Didn't know She sent old ones out on raids anymore. Thought She would just Integrate them."

I bristled slightly at that and shook my head, "She works in mysterious ways, doesn't She?"

The Cloak nodded, "Yes She does. We are blessed by the Great Father to have our Great Mother in our Home."

Not our Home. The Home of Our Ancestors. I nodded and then faced the rear of the Hideout we were raiding. It had been some time since I had ever felt for the Skenndar, and yet...they were at Her mercy, pliable to Her will, controlled by Her fancy.

Piteous things, so weak as to be toyed with by Snip-snaps.

That's how things had been at first, when the raids started after She took over. The Skenndar, the weak little mammals, had been easy to kill. Many Draconis even made a sport of it; it had been called "Caest Skenndar Sangris" or "Spill the Scaleless' Blood". I even partook, so influenced by Her rule, so cruel as a young Yearling I was.

That was back when I thought of her as my Great Mother, and not of the Fiend that haunted my dreams with Her cruel laugh and sharp fangs.

Your family is dead because of you. You Birthing Mother, your Birthing Father, all dead for your mistake. What a foolish little cub, wearing his Birthing Father's cast-off skin as his own! Step out of your hide and see what you have done, the havoc you have wrought.

I shook off the image of Her teeth in my head and stared at the rear of the Hideout. Ever since three Blinking-Cycles ago, the Skenndar had been winning our skirmishes. Right now the Captured Fires had not been lit but there were a few Skenndar prowling the nighttime. They seemed wary, as if on edge, but everyone knew that Skenndar were dumb as wool-beasts and cluck-beasts. They were not capable of cognisant speech, nor coherent thought. It was pure restlessness that kept the stragglers up, not wary minds and distrustful thoughts.

I flicked my tail to catch the attention of the elder Cloak. "Yes," the Draconis asked sincerely.

"What is your name?"

He looked a tad put-aback by my question, as if my insistence to know was alienâ€"and it was. "Crimson Hue of His Bright Eye, but most others call me Crimson; you?"

"Sharp Fang." I would never give someone the Given Name that had killed my family: "Of His Blinking Eye". I stared at the Hideout and sighed deeply, "Fly true."

"Wind at your back Fang," Crimson replied as he took off, large wings

lifting him as easily as breathing in and out. The raid was to begin.

It started off well: we carted off a few of the baskets of fish from their storage not-cave and a small amount of wool-beasts—twenty or so—away from the Hideout when tragedy struck.

Or, should I say, idiocy struck.

A particularly _thick_ Bonehead—whose name was Grinding of Scales on His Skin—mistook the face-fur of a Skenndar for a wool-beast and ripped a quarter of the poor fool's face off before she realised her mistake. Out of mercy, a Pricker named Sting of His Bite shot a quill deep into the Skenndar's neck, ending its life.

Thusly the battle started.

Flames shot, not-fangs made of Ringing Midgar flew across the battle, clipping the wings of many-a-Draconis. Those were the merciful deaths.

Crimson, the younger Cloak, and I had perched on the top of a cliff when the battle started, waiting for the opportune moment for us to enter the fray. The younger Cloak was not pleased with this tactical choice, "_Et tenn! Crimson, et vas an sangris, dyek? Et vas an sangris!" He whined at the older Cloak, dipping his head and snorting in frustration.

"_Nik, nik tenn. Sakk nesse! **Nesse, **Flashfang!_" Crimson retorted. He said something along the lines of 'No, you can't go fight. Sit here, Flashfang!'.

I finally understood the point of her teaching certain cubs Old Tongue! It wasn't just to weed out potential traitors, but to also allow for communication between members of Her Nest without spies finding out what She had planned! She is clever, I had to give her that.

I pretended not to understand them and simply watched as Clever Twist of His Tongue, a Twice with jet-green stripes along her head, snatched up three woolbeasts and flew off with a shriek of joy. "I will return and report to Her!"

"Brown-snout," I griped. Crimson and Flashfang nodded, Flashfang's snout wrinkling up as he tried not to snarl at Twist's retreating form.

The battle was turning from an actual battle into a one-sided slaughter in favour of the Skenndar as His Blinking Eye rose in His Underbelly. I nodded at Flashfang and he vaulted from his position on the cliff with his wing-claws. Lighting himself on fire, he crawled up to the top of a not-tree and attempted to attack a Skenndar. Then the Skenndar attacked back, and visibly wounded him.

Crimson and I stared in shock, no ordinary Skenndar could beat a Cloak! This had to be the Skenndar Great Father!

That is when Crimson lit from his place on the cliff to the Hideout below, quietly stalking a small herd of wool-beasts. It was when the largest part of my Murder got captured that I decided it was time for

me to act and signal a retreat. As much as I hated Her, I didn't want Draconis like Crimson, Flashfang, Scales, and Sting to perish in vain.

I launched myself into the Underbelly and pumped my wings to reach a proper altitude. Once I was sufficiently high enough, I hovered as best I couldâ€"for Guards were not meant to hover as Scouts wereâ€"and spotted my target: the not-tree that Flashfang had been beaten down at. I dove, wingtips tucked into my flanks, and drew on the Tha'umâ€"the Voice of the Guards. I drew the Word deep into my chest and let it out with a shriek: "**blÃ¡|zt**!"

The not-tree tore apart in a scatter of broken tree-bits and frantic Skenndar. I smugly nodded as I pushed on through the wave of nausea that comes with using the Tha'um. Serves the dumb beasts right. They should know better than to mess with a Shadow! Even the Skenndar Great Father can't beat me!_

As I wheeled about and reigned in my rolling guts, I found a new target, one that would terrify the Skenndar so bad they would drop dead from the shock: the Captured Fire.

Unlike other beasts, the Skenndar aren't gifted with any modes of fighting at night; they don't have good eyes, nor do they have good ears, nor do they have the ability to sense vibrations, nor do they have the ability to smell their opponent in full, nor do they even have the ability to feel the change in temperature that occurs around other beasts or Draconis. In the dark they are defenceless. In the dark, Draconis have the upper field.

"**gjÃ³str**!" The Tha'um tossed the Captured Fire over on its side, setting the landscape ablaze for an instant before the Word drew down and the flames quelled when the pressure lifted.

I darted back into the Underbelly, shrieking to the remaining Draconis, "Flee! We have enough to placate Her! Don't let the Skenndar any further on risk of death! To our Home!"

Many calls answered back, among that the fluid sound of Crimson giving an affirmative, and I wheeled around. I built another Word inside my chest, unleashing it at another not-tree, "**strÃ«chan**!" The not-tree blew apart into splinters and a sharp burst of flame, throwing three Skenndar from its heights. Finally,_ I sighed to myself, I can leave these filthy beasts...I am un-hittable, un-defeated, invincible, invisible, the Legendary Shadow of the Great Father! All must bow to my might!_ In the midst of my celebratory crowing, I felt my wings forcibly close around my body as the sensation of being wrapped in a large web enveloped me. Thrashing in my bonds, I attempted to break free, to escape a grisly fate at the hands of Midgard, but was unsuccessful. So instead, I closed my eyes and prayed to Him, prayed that the Draconis in my Murder were okay. And that I would die swiftly and wait for him in Hel.

Neither wish were fulfilled.

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Once upon a time, for all tales begin this way, there was nothing but the Universe._

Large and empty, the Universe was lonely for It had no one to share Itself with. So, in a fit of either madness or inspiration, the Universe created an Egg.

The Egg shone with every light of every colour, reflected the past, present, and the future in its shell. It grew in size, tripling and quadrupling in circumference until it was ready.

From its depths emerged JÃ¶rmungadr, the Great Father, and the Universe was no longer alone. From the egg-milk was created the stars, shining bright for JÃ¶rmungadr. Created from the shell pieces were planets of all shapes and sizes, ready for life to begin on them. And the Universe was happy.

Yet JÃ¶rmungadr was lonely, for He had no one like him to be with. So the Universe granted Him the Skill to Create in His image.

Finding a planet the colour of His scales and His Underbelly, He breathed a mist and from it came the First Guards. He looked at the white and black Draconis, one Ridge-span high, and said, "You are named Umbra and Luz. From you shall come greatness; take your Gift and guard Her."

Then he breathed forth a mist again and from it came the First Attackers, crimson and gold Draconis five Ridge-span across. He spoke to them as well, "You are Vaala and Ash. From you shall come strength. Use your Gift to cut down anyone who might hurt Her."

And the third time he breathed mist, it gave form to the First Scouts. They were beryl and spring-green but one sixteenth of a Ridge-span high, yet carried themselves with pride. "You are Giftig and Veezhe. From you shall come multitudes. Use your Gift to find sustenance for Her."

Then, JÃ¶rmungadr breathed out mist one last time, and in its depths was a small Egg, golden in colour and precious to the Draconis around it. "This," He whispered, "Is La Bella; just as I am your Great Father, so shall she be your Great Mother upon her arrival. Guard Her, Attack Her enemies, Scout for food for Her; never let harm befall Her for She is your future." Then, His piece said, He encircled the blue-green planet the Draconis were born on and took His tail in His mouth.

It is said that when He finally lets go, all Draconis will be called to Hel with Him, and the life of Midgard will come to an end in a blaze of fire and ice.

So ends the tale of our Creation, and of our Great Father and Mother. There is truth in Song.

2. Crawling Upon the Ground

(A/N: This chapter brought to you by Google Translate. Google Translate: "Accuracy? What is accuracy be? We is accuracy! Always.")

Pain. All I could feel was pain. Pain in my head, sharp, like a

Pricker quill between my eyes. A dull ache in my chest indicated a few broken, or heavily bruised, ribs. The worst pain, however, came from the gashes in my hide and tail. Dirt and gravel had lodged itself in the cuts and was rubbing the tender flesh sharply. Every time I breathed in, the not-vines of the not-web tightened around my body, reminding me I was trapped here on Midgard.

Damn Skenndar! I growled in my head angrily, _I swear by the Great Father's Bright Eye that I will cause whatever Skenndar shot me down, __**lots**__ of pain. I promise this!_

Its scent was all over the not-web; an oddly comforting combination of ash, Ringing Midgard, fire, and trees. Whatever Skenndar made this had to be legendary! No Skenndar had ever caught me before, so this one must be their Guard.

I had also noticed that the not-web that held me was different from the not-webs that the Skenndar usually use. Where the normal not-webs are made of vines and weighted tree-balls, this one was made of what smelled like Ringing Midgard and burned prong-beast. It was tougher than the vines and I was having trouble getting up with the Ringing Midgard weighting me down. Clever, clever Skenndar.

I lay there, kissing Midgard and eating harbinger. _I am un-hittable, un-defeatable, invincible, invisible, the Legendary Shadow of the Great Father, and I am an idiot! What kind of cub just gloats in the midst of a battle, whether or not they had used the Tha'um to turn the tide?! A yolk-brain, that's who!_ Snorting angrily, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to drift off in the midst of pain. This wouldn't have been the first time I'd done this, nor would it be the last.

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Once upon a time, for that is how all stories begin, there was the creation of the Skenndar Great Ones.

The Universe was happy with the Draconis, they were not displeasing to It, but It longed for more. So, It created the three Skenndar Great Ones, brothers by the name Vili, VÃ©, and Odin. They too were displeased with being the only of their kind, so they sought the power to Create from the Universe and were granted such.

Choosing the Great Father's planet, the brothers looked for suitable objects to glean life from. Vili spotted the trees that spring from the places where Draconis have died and mentioned it to his brothers. They determined that the recycling of life would be an excellent source for their Skenndar.

Odin took up an ashbark that grew from an Attacker and made the first Skenndar sire. Vili filled it with the wisdom of strength and VÃ© blessed it with the limited sight and hearing of their kind. Then Odin took up a dapplebark tree grown from a Guard and gave it the form and life of an egg-bearing Skenndar. Vili filled it with the wisdom of an egg-bearer and VÃ© granted it Skenndar sight and hearing.

Satisfied with their work, the three brothers placed the Skenndar on Midgard and left them to do their own thing, going on to Asgard high above the Great Father.

They were a novelty at first, a pet to have in the home. The more Skenndar you had at your beck and call in your Home, the better off you were. The Draconis taught their Skenndar to speak Draco, about art, how to hunt, and how to love. They were educated and refined until they were like scaleless, two-legged Draconis. There was peace.

It did not last long, but that is a story for another time. There is truth in song.

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I woke to the wet smell of His Breath upon Midgard and the sound of tree-bits breaking. The forest around me had gone silent, not even the loud calls of feather-beasts could be heard. Something was wrong.

"_Ohh, er goÃ°in skulu hata mig. Sumir missa rÃ½tingur Ã¾eirra eÃ°a uppÃ¡halds mÃ¡l Ã¾eirra, en ekki mig, nei! Ã¶g stjÃ³rna aÃ° missa heilt DREKINN!_" I frozeâ€"not that I could do much moving around regardlessâ€"and inhaled.

There. I could smell Skenndar. Another deep whiff and I almost cried out in anger; the Skenndar approaching me was the same one that shot me down.

The smell of ash, fire, Ringing Midgard, and trees permeated the very ground itself, invading my nostrils and tongue with its calm. _No! No, no, no, no! No! It can't get any closer! I won't let it!_ Terror took over, clouding my vision in blankets of grey and I thrashed for a bit, drawing its attention to me.

"_HvaÃ° var Ã¾etta?! Er aÃ° NÃ³tt Heift? VÃ¡_,_" the Skenndar barked inâ€"what I assumed to be, since I could not read emotion in beastsâ€"awe. "_LÃ-ta Ã¡; Ã¾ess Ã³reiÃ°u! Kannski..._" Hurried steps grew closer quickly and I stiffened in fear.

If you don't move, it can't tell if you're alive...if you stay perfectly still it'll think you're dead and leave you alone. Just. Stay. Still.

"_Oh! Ã¶-Ã¶g gerÃ°i Ã¾aÃ°! Ãžetta er frÃ¡; bÃ¡rt; Ã¶g trÃ°i ekki aÃ° skaut reyndar niÃ°ur NÃ³tt Heift! Ã¶g felldi Ã¾essa voldugu dÃ½riÃ°!_" The Skenndar came up behind me, clumsy and inept in its stealthâ€"if it had even been trying to be stealthy in the first place, that is. Placing its hind paw on my flank, hard, it purred with pleasure.

Okay, no more mister dead Draconis, I huffed, shrugging it off and abandoning my faÃ§ade of death, my eyes now open and observing everything. From what I could see, the Skenndar that shot me down was barely a yearling! _Ohh, the humiliation! To be shot down by a mere cub! So falls the last Shadow of the Great Father!_

"_VÃ¡_, Ã¾aÃ° hefur augu eins og minn...,_ the cub churred, head cocked to the side. A mop of red hair framed its head like a halo of flame, bringing out its bright green eyes.

He has eyes like mine, I mused, _what cruel trick is this by the

Great Father? Am I being punished? Is this my comeuppance for hubris?_

The cub reached inside the fold of hisâ€"for it smelled heavily of a Skenndar sire, therefore must be a 'he'â€"fur and pulled out a not-fang made of Ringing MiÃ°gard. He held it above his head and growled pathetically, "_Ã‰g mun drepa Ã¾ig, NÃ³tt Heift. Ã‰g mun skera Ã°t hjarta Ã¾Ã°nu og koma meÃ° Ã¾aÃ° til fÃ¶rur mÃ±s..._" He tensed and pulled the not-fang higher, readying himself for the killing blow. My eyes met his again and he bared his nubby Skenndar fangs, "_Ã‰g er vÃ±kingur._" He was hesitant, terrified even. "_**Ã‰g er vÃ±kingur,**_" he roared, "_Ã‰g er...Ã©g mun..._"

I stared at him a little while longer, willing his death to be as painful as my own, and then closed my eyes in acceptance. _If you're going to kill me, do it honourably. I will ascend to the Great Father in the form of a mighty tree, and you will tremble in my shade as I cast you into Hel._

"_...Ã‰g gerÃ°i Ã¾etta..._"

No blow came; no final breath was ended and no blood spilled. Instead, I heard a soft noise and felt the pressure across my breast lessen.

whirr, whirr, whirrâ€"SNAP!

Once again, the tension of the not-vines wrapping me up was lessening. _What is the Skenndar doing?!_

But he continued to chew the not-vines with his not-fang until I could move again. I leapt up in one fluid motionâ€"ignoring the massive amount of pain I was in from simply getting upâ€"and pinned him to a piece of Midgard. "Skenndar," I growled at him, ready to exact my revenge. Then a wave of pain hit me and I knew that I had to get away, and if I took the time to kill the Skenndar cub, I wouldn't have the energy to escape. So insteadâ€"***schlÃ¶phan**!" The Skenndar's head-fur blew back by the force of my Tha'um and he stiffened, but did not fall unconscious.

Damn. Looks like...I didn't have enough energy behind that...one... I was very dizzy and very nauseous. Using a Tha'umâ€"and an alteration one at thatâ€"while already injured was not a good idea. Nope, not a good idea at all.

Simultaneously satisfied and disgusted by the smell of piddle emanating from the Skenndar, I gave a satisfactory huff and attempted to fly off as if nothing was wrong with me at all. Note: I said _attempt_.

I listed to the right constantly, and couldn't hold a power glide for more than a few breaths. Stumbling and crashing my way through the damned forest, I finally managed to catch air and maintain it for more than before. Unfortunately, the air I was catching was right above a large drop-off, and I wasn't flying so much as falling to my demise.

I never realised how bad the wool-beasts we take during our Raids must feel, to be hoisted in the air and then dropped into Her waiting maw, until now. The wind whipped my ear-flaps, tore at my partially

furled wings, stung at my various wounds. The whole ordeal must've lasted only a few breaths—though it felt like an eternity—but I managed to unfurl my wings and use them to create enough drag so that I wouldn't go **SPLAT **against Midgard. Again.

If I hadn't previously broken something by falling from His Underbelly to Midgard the first time, I certainly did this time. The pain was absolutely unbearable, excruciating. I could barely breathe because the pain across my chest was so great. Through a great feat of strength, I finally managed to drag myself—bit by bit—towards the lake that lay in front of me. I dipped into it and winced as the water hit my lacerations and abrasions.

"Dammit!" I roared in pain, "Stupid damn Skenndar! _I hope you rot on Midgard as a draugr for all of eternity!_" Cursing the scaleless from here to Hel, I finished my wound-cleaning bath and crawled out to rest.

Sleep...sleep will heal my wounds. I created a bed of embers and wearily snuggled into their warmth. As I drifted off I wondered, why didn't he kill me?

Skenndar always go for the kill.

Always.

3. Face-to-Snout

(A/N: I REGRET NOTHING! NOT EVEN THE FACT THAT I HAVE BEEN UNKNOWINGLY CALLING THE NIGHT FURY RACE NIGHT MOTHER. OOPS! I'LL GO BACK AND FIX THAT! Anyway, shouting aside, this is one of three stories I will devote my time to from now on. This, Defying the Norm, and Penitence & Patience, Glitches & Viruses. These three will be finished before I update anything else so if the story you like is not on this list, sorry! Expect more regular updates from now on! (Emphasis on "more"). As a note: all my 'Viking-speak' is gotten through manipulated Google Translate Icelandic so if anyone sees any issues please tell me so I can learn. I have no way of checking grammar so...:I

Anyway! Did I ever mention I love dream-sequences? 'Cause I do. I really, really do. Expect to see more in the future. (Also my second-favourite thing about worldbuilding is religion. I am a non-denominational Christian and thusly all of my fictitious religions reflect that. I hope y'all don't mind my massive religion-fest in this chapter.) Carry on! Enjoy the chapter!)

I woke to His Bright Eye rising over the horizon. Mind in a haze, I stretched and yawned, immediately regretting it when pain shot through my extremities. Great Father this hurt! Like yesterday my tail and ribs hurt, as did the gashes in my side and on my paws. At least now they were clean and would heal but I had to check the extent of the damage. _And I need to get some food, _I thought as my stomach let out a low growl and cramped. The fish in the lake splashed, taunting me. Stupid scaled assholes...

Pushing the thought of food out of my mind, I used the reflective surface of the water to check out my injuries. I had a large gash across my right flank, smaller cuts across my chin and chest, and I

was missing a fang. _Damn Midgard and its sharp edges._ I couldn't see the internal damage but I was pretty sure I fractured at least two of my ribs. The pain in my tail was the most prevalent and I could barely drag it over so I could see the problem; however, when I did, I let loose a roar that must have pierced the veil to the Great Father Himself. My left stabiliser fin was gone!

The entire fin was torn into shreds and no amount of rest or excellent healing Tha'um was going to fix it. The spines of my destroyed fin were jutting out, pale white staggering in comparison to the black, tattered membrane that flapped between them and the rusty, clotted blood that coated that side of my tail. Rage overtook me.

Damn that Skenndar! Damn him to an eternity as aâ€"no! Damn him to a long and painful life! Damn him that he might see his precious Ragnarok! Damn him that he would never die in honourable battle! Damn him to life!

I shrieked and let loose foul curses that would shame my Birthing-Mother. I cursed the Skenndar. I cursed his offspring, lineage, endeavours, genitals, and his race as a whole. I swore vengeance tenfold and spewed firebolts until my throat was raw with the effort of pushing them out. When I was done with my fit of rage, I curled up and stared at my ruined tail angrily.

_He crippled me, _I realised with shocking clarity. _I will never fly again._

There were tales that used to echo in the Ringing Caves of the Home of Our Ancestors of Draconis who lost their ability to fly and went mad. My Birthing-Mother used to sing one to me when I was a cub.

Once upon a time, for this is how all stories start, there was the decent into madness of a Scout named Bright Shine of His Scales.

Bright Shine was the fastest flier around. She could outrun even the swiftest of Attackers and the fastest of Guards. Her wings shone with the echo of her name and she was proud; so very proud.

One day she was issued a challenge by a Draconis long since fed up with her boasts and pride. "You cannot reach the Great Father's Bright Eye," the Draconis said. "Your wings will burn up and you will plummet to Midgard and die."

Bright Shine could not say no. No one said she could not fly somewhere! How dare that Draconis even think that their statement was true! She accepted the challenge and took off in a blur of colours.

The first hundred wingbeats were easy. Bright Shine climbed higher and higher with each downward thrust of her mighty wings.

The next hundred wingbeats were more difficult. Bright Shine found her wings screaming for release as she continued her upwards climb.

_The final hundred wingbeats were agony. Each little muscle in her

perfect wings sang with pain as she pushed herself harder and harder to continue the ascent. She was so close; yet, in her prideful fury, she had forgotten one tiny detail about the Great Father's Bright Eye._

When the Great Father first shined His Bright Eye upon Midgard and the Draconis below, He knew that it was powerful. To protect His Children from hurting themselves, He set up a barrier so that none could come in contact with the great Fire that burned in His Bright Eye.

Bright Shine hit that barrier with a sharp cracking sound, then began to fall down towards Midgard. She plummeted downwards with greater and greater speed until she was falling faster than she had been flying. When she hit Midgard, the Draconis that had been watching the spectacle mourned her, thinking her dead.

Bright Shine wasn't dead, but she may as well be. Her precious, perfect wings were ruined. Mangled and tattered, her wings would never heal. No amount of rest or Tha'um would fix what the barrier had done to her wings. She would never fly again.

Bright Shine wasted away on Midgard. Unable to perform even the simplest of tasks, she had to be taken care of through several Blink Cycles. Her mental state deteriorated until she could no longer differentiate between friend and foe. She would attack anyone who came near her. In the end, she took her own life by throwing herself off of a cliff. Her pride was her downfall.

There is truth in Song.

I was Bright Shine this time. Felled by my pride. I spat a firebolt at the ground in disgust. _What kind of pathetic cub am I? Felledâ€"crippledâ€"by a Skenndar!_ I looked back at my ruined stabiliser fin and, in a bout of anger, managed to push aside my pain in order to properly take care of the mess that was what was left of it.

I unsheathed my teeth and tore the remainder of the membrane away from the bone; then, almost screaming from the pain I was inflicting upon myself, I snapped the bone off where it met flesh. I spat the bone fragment out of my mouth and hissed as blood began to flow from the reopened wound. With one last grunt of effort, I shot a small stream of fire out and cauterised the wound.

After that I stopped holding back the waves of nausea and black that rippled in the corners of my mind. Darkness overtook me and I passed into unconsciousness gratefully; blissfully slipping away from the pain and worries that plagued me while waking.

My last waking thought at that time was how the blue in His Underbelly seemed to mirror my own lachrymose mood.

And darkness overtook me.

xxx}-|||xxx(fsh)xxx

_I was just a cub, huddled in the nest of moss and smouldering coals my Birthing Mother made for me and my siblings. I was the youngest and the only one to not yet fly but I was not upset by this. In fact,

I was apprehensive about soon taking flight. My Birthing-Siblings had tormented me for many Bright-Cycles with tales of young cubs that had died learning to fly and I was scared of failure._

I was currently thinking about the multitude of unnamed cubs that had plummeted to their deaths when I heard it. There was a deep rumble and a low thrumming that resonated in my chest and made me suddenly numb and calm. I remained this way until I heard the screams of my Birthing-Family. My Birthing-Mother screamed in pain and there was the horribly clear noise of bones crunching. My Birthing-Father and Birthing-Siblings roared. Following that was the sound and smell of firebolts hitting something.

The sound of a large bout of flames resounded in the cave we inhabited in the Home of Our Ancestors and the smell of burning Draconis flesh assaulted my nostrils. I shrank back in my soft, warm nest and cried out in fear. Where were my Birthing-Family? Were they okay? What had happened?! Was it safe to leave my nest? I reached out with my Mind's Eye in order to try and find them. I just had to find them!

Just as soon as the worry began to claw my gut, the thrumming was back and with it the numbing calm. In my Mind's Eye was the gentle softness of my Birthing-Mother only multiplied a thousandfold. I purred at Her presence and stood erect to meet Her.

She stared at me through the opening of our cave. **Do not fear, little cub. All is well.**

_ "What has happened?" I asked Her, making sure to not make eye-contact._

_ **There were intruders in Our Home. The intruders have been taken care of.** Oh, Her voice was kind and Her words were true, I knew that as soon as She spoke them._

_ "My Birthing-Family! Where are they?" I was ashamed to be selfish in front of Her but I was worried._

_ **They perished. But do not fear, little cub,** She assured me, **for they have been Assimilated into Me. They will live so long as I live.**_

_ I was flooded with relief when She told me that. I would make sure She lived, if not for Her glory, then for my Birthing-Family's glory. "Who are you?" As soon as I inquired this of Her I Saw the answer with my Mind's Eye._

_ **I am your Great Mother.** And She was; and She was perfect. **Will you dedicate yourself to protect Me, little cub?**_

_ I cried out, lurching from my nest to kneel in front of Her. "Yes. I will protect You with all of my power!"_

_ **Do you have mastery over Tha'um, little cub?** _

_ "Not yet. My Birthing-Father was going to teach me but all I have learned are a few Destruction Tha'um." I would do anything for Her. Anything at all._

There was a pause and I Saw her shift in my Mind's Eye. For a single instant, in Her place stood a demon with eight milky eyes and rotting fangs in its mouth. Then She returned to my Sight and I breathed a sigh of relief. **I shall teach you all I know. I will be your teacher as well as your Great Mother.**

I was overjoyed to be blessed with such a wonderful opportunity. "Thank you," I crawled low upon the floor of ourâ€"myâ€"cave and prostrated myself to Her out of respect. "Thank you Great Mother!"

**You are most welcome, little cub.** She smiled at me and I melted. **You will make a fine Guard one Blink-Cycle.** And, despite all the pain and death I had been witness to that Bright-Cycle, I was thankful for this Bright-Cycle. I was glad things had panned out the way they did. I would not change a thing.

She was all that mattered to me now.

****xxx}-| |)xxx(fsh)xxx****

The intense pain I passed out to was a mere dull throb now as I awoke. Even the ache in my chest from my injured ribs was a mere prickling when I stood. I stretched and scanned my surroundings. If I were to go mad in this place I may as well know every inch of my prison.

Where I was appeared to be was the bottom of a large Fire Mouthâ€"much like the Home of Our Ancestorsâ€"only without the Heartfire spilling up. The Fire Mouth was, upon inspection and exploration, fifty wingspans wide one way and thirty-four wingspans wide the other way. Trees grew in patches around the edge and I silently mourned the Draconis who had this prison as a final resting place. There was a small lake in the centre of the Fire Mouth that held a school of fishâ€"some of which I caught and ate to sate my hungerâ€"but not enough to last me the Blink-Cycles that it would take for me to go mad. _I'll starve then._ From what I could observe, the walls of the Fire Mouth were incredibly high, therefore too high for some prongbeast or other prey to accidentally fall in.

Definitely starving first. The only other type of animal that inhabited my prison were featherbeasts, and I was _not_ going to break ancient law and eat them.

Every cub was taught this: _The fish in the sea and the beasts of the ground are fair prey, as are the Skenndar that walk dumbly on two legsâ€"but never the Skenndar who walk on four. However, the featherbeasts that fly in His Underbelly are brother to us and to eat them would be to consume a Draconis._

Besides...I wouldn't be able to catch them anyways...

I petulantly curled up on myself, mindful of my freshly-severed stabiliser fin, and sighed. Damn Skenndar.

Hearing the featherbeasts chirp, I looked up in time to see one fly over the lip of the Fire Mouth to freedom. I envied the featherbeasts for their flight. That's when it hit me. I had to learn to fly once, who's to say that I couldn't learn again?!

Some time later I had given up on trying to fly straight with my

missing fin and had decided to focus my energy on getting the Hel out of the Fire Mouth. I crawled back a few paces and then took a running leap for the imposing wall before me. I made it a quarter of the way up on my own power and tried flapping my wings for a boost while I scrabbled for purchase on the weather-worn wall. My claws slipped and slid past the minuscule cracks in the stone and I found myself slipping again so I kicked off and glided over to the other side of the lake, listing to the right like usual. "Dammit!" I shrieked to His Underbelly. All I heard in response to my roar was an echo, distorted beyond compare. I spat a firebolt at the ground and turned again, taking a running leap again. I pumped my wings furiously, trying to at least make it half way up, but I spiralled out of control and slammed my right side into the rock face.

Again and again I threw myself at the wall, and again and again I failed. It was the lowest part of the wall and I couldn't even clear it enough to climb the rest of the way. My paws and sides were scraped up again and patches of scales were missing from my many failed attempts to leave.

I fell in the lake this time, grunting in annoyance as twinges of pain struck me when the water entered my bloodstream. Pulling myself out, I shook off and stared at the fish inside, stomach grumbling in protest. All the physical exercise was causing my energy reserves to drop rapidly and I needed food and rest to replenish them. Unfortunately I was unable to catch one and I sulked in my impromptu nest of simmering coals and tree-bits. _Stupid fish._

As I settled down, the wind shifted and I caught scent of something familiar: ash, Ringing Midgard, fire, and trees. It was the Skenndar cub! My pupils dilated as I focused on his scent and where he was standing. The wind was blowing at me from the side of the Fire Mouth where I had attempted to escape from but I could not pinpoint his exact location. Did he come to laugh at the downed Draconis? Was he here to finish the job? Now I was not bound by his tricky not-web. Now I was free; now I would return the favour. _I'll take one of your important parts, cub. See how you feel after I tear apart one of your legs!_

Many breaths passed and he did not reveal himself, nor did he end my life from afar. I had curled up on my nest and was currently resting when I heard a clatter from where the cub was hiding. My rage at the pain the Skenndar caused me flared and I glided as best I could to the source. On the floor of the Fire Mouth was a small, charred tree-bit. It smelled of ash and the ashbark it was made from but mostly it smelled of the overwhelming scent of that Skenndar.

I heard a small squeaking noise like a hatchling begging for milk and swiveled my head upwards, my ear-flaps at attention. There, in the craggy outface, I saw the cub. His head-fur was tousled and wild and his eyesâ€"still so much like mineâ€"were wide. He _reeked_ of fear and piddle. I maintained eye-contact with him for a few more breaths before I turned away, picked up the charred tree-bit, and trudged back to my nest, projecting an air of I-don't-give-a-damn as best I could.

Within thirty breaths the cub's smell faded from the wind and I laid my head on my paws in exasperation. He was within reach; I could have batted him from his perch on the wall and taken from him tenfold what he had taken from me. Yet I didn't.

Why? I pondered as I stared cross-eyed at the tree-bit laying between my paws. _I have had two chances now to kill him and yet I didn't. Why didn't I kill him when he freed me? Caest Skenndar sangris! Why didn't I kill him when he was here only breaths ago?! Sangris tenk sangris!_ My nostrils flared and I inhaled the hearty scent that permeated the charred ashbark-bit. Ash, Ringing Midgard, fire, and trees. Why did it fill me with calm.

Was this why I couldn't kill him? Because he smelled good?! What a pathetic reason for sparing a Skenndar's life! I tossed the tree-bit away from me and hid my snout under my remaining stabiliser fin. I stared at it longingly and sighed.

Great Father above us, hear my plea. Grant me the wisdom of ages so that I might learn the reason the Skenndar cub still lives; why I have let him go on multiple occasions. Allow me to survive the flylust and bring me enough food to survive. I do not desire excess. Please, I raised my head toward His darkening Underbelly and pled with the Great Father with all my might, _There must be a reason I am still alive. There must be a reason I broke free of Her Mindtrap. There must be a reason I am here instead of thousands of wingbeats away from this accursed place. If You would be so kind, give me a sign of my reason here on this forsaken piece of Midgard. I cannot survive on my own power. I need You, Great Father, to nurture me in the way that only You do. There is truth in Song._ Prayer finished, I curled back into a little snug ball and closed my eyes.

As I drifted off to sleep I smelled the faint scent of ash, Ringing Midgard, fire, and trees. I blissfully basked in that scent as He Wept all night.

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I met the Skenndar's eyes and kept contact for many breaths, never once blinking (neither did he). As we stayed face-to-snout he reached forward with one paw. "Tannlaus. NÃ³tt Heift." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, "Vinur minn. Skuldabréf-brÃ³ir minn."

I watched as the cub, no longer a cub but a full-grown Skenndar sire, backed away from me. His mouth opened up and he screamed, a high, keening sound much like the ones that injured hatchlings make. It pierced my soul, my very being, and I leapt forward only to encounter a large barrier of strange whispering symbols.

_ "ÃžÃ° getur ekki flÃ½ ja," they murmured to me, "HÃ°n mun finna Ã¾ig og skuldabréf-brÃ³ur Ã¾inn. HÃ°n mun drepa skuldabréf-brÃ³ur Ã¾inn. HÃ°n mun rjÃ°fa skudabréf. ÃžÃ° verÃ°ur aÃ° Ã¾jÃ¡st." He screamed louder and I pound myself against the wall of symbols to no avail. It does not budgeâ€œit did not budgeâ€œit will not budge.. . "ÃžaÃ° er ekkert undan. ÃžÃ° getur ekki flÃ½ ja. Ã-líl Ã©l Mikla MÃ³ur. Drepa VillutrÃ°armaÃ°ur. BrjÃ³ta skuldabréf. BrjÃ³ta skuldabréf. ÃžaÃ° er ekkert undan. Ãžetta er Ã¶rlÃ¶g. BrjÃ³ta skuldabréf._

The scene shifts, like His Tears blurring Midgard's harsh edges, and I am facing a large Egg. It is important and yet terrifying. I bow to the Egg and sing to the Egg. Beside me is the Skenndar not-cub bowing and singing to the Egg as well. His eyes are dull and lifeless and blood trickles from his mouth. This is wrong.

I cannot stop.

The Egg hatches and She emerges, a rotten corpse with wings. Her eyes are blind but Her Mind's Eye is bright and she spots the not-cub immediately. She is drawn to his bright Form and his strong Mind and She reaches down to pluck him from the Heartfire we are standing in. He doesn't screamâ€"didn't screamâ€"won't scream. He was silentâ€"is silentâ€"will be silent.

I am not.

I scream at Her. I shoot firebolt after firebolt until I have no more fire to shoot. I scream every Tha'um I know. My legs are weak and my wings are made of Ringing Midgard. I cannot move. I cannot fight back. I cannot save him. I weep.

The scene shifts.

_I will be plummiting. I will fall towards Midgard with surprising speed. No breaths will pass in between the time I begin falling and now. No breaths will pass in between now and when I hit Midgard.

-

Only I do notâ€"did notâ€"will not.

I will pull away, the not-cub on my back. He will roar with pleasure and I will join in. His Bright Eye will set on our flight. We will live forever. It will be perfect.

The scene shifts.

Breathe in breathe out do not let them near me. They do not understand they cannot understand they will never understand. I am alone. I am alone. I am alone. Why am I alone? Why? I am hated it must be otherwise why would I be alone all the time. No one understands me they never will no Draconis will ever get me. He gets me. Never ever in a million years ever.

The scene shifts.

I am a Skenndar. He is a Skenndar. We seasonmate.

He is a Skenndar. She is a Skenndar. They lifemate.

They are Skenndar. I am Skenndar. We are mates.

Everyone lives.

The scene shifts.

A red stream of fire. A blue stream of fire. Two trees. A vine.

The scene shifts.

I am Draconis. He is Draconis. We fly together.

I am Draconis. He is. We fly together.

I am. He is. We fly.

I am. He. We fly.

I. He. We.

Together.

The scene shifts.

4. Skuldabréf-bráðir

(A/N: Okay...not much going on here imo but! I like it, and if I like it, then I did good. Mostly character growth and some plot but lots of exposition. :D I hope y'all enjoy this like I did! Expect a chapter of Defying the Norm up soon, since I've been working on that too. I should work on Penitence & Patience, Glitches & Viruses but I'm stuck on an idea for DtN and it's eating me alive!

Pro tip: if you want me to update a certain story, bombard me with reviews!)

I woke as the first rays of His Bright Eye brushed down into the Fire Mouth. Midgard was damp with His Tears and His Breath hung low, making the temperature unbearably cold. _I need to warm up..._ I stretched out my body, mindful of my injuries, and yawned loudly. My stomach made its desires known by loudly complaining and it was all I could do to not throw myself into the lake with wild abandon. _Patience...patience is key._

Patience left me with three fish and a thoroughly soaked hide. "Three," I muttered as I created a bed of coals in the same spot I slept on last night, "three damn fish. At this rate I'll be dead before a Blink-Cycle is up." I rolled around in the coals until my external temperature rose to acceptable levels, then I shook off the ash and began inspecting my wounds and testing my flexibility and reflexes. If that Skenndar cub came back, I needed to be ready to defend myself.

The places where I had rubbed my scales off trying to escape were still raw, though they were clean and healing. The scrapes from when I fell to Midgard were healing quite nicely and scales were beginning to return to the abrasions. My breathing was less restricted than yesterday and I was able to turn sharply without any complications so the fractures had to be healing okay. I'd try for an Alteration Tha'um later to strengthen and speed the healing process later, once I'd had more food. My tailfin was, sadly, still severed; though the cauterising of the wound was a smart idea, as there was a small infection on the corner I didn't get. I picked at it with a flame-heated fang and seared it closed. The hissing of the pus evaporating filled my ears and I could not, for the life of me, hold back the whimper of pain.

"Great Father!" I swore as I turned somersaults and did flips to test my manoeuvrability. The pain of my internal injuries was still there, though less severe than they would be if I weren't a Guard.

_Attackers are renowned for their strength, Scouts for their speed,

but the Guards are renowned for their adaptability. For if we cannot protect the Great Mother as we are, we will change until we are fit to do so._

I rested on my now barely-Fire temperature coals and tried to pass the time while I remembered the best Alteration Tha'um to fix my injuries by watching His Breath pass by in His Underbelly above. "That one looks like a prongbeast..._ I could use **renforzer** but...no. I always botch that one. Last time I tried it, my spines were jagged for a Blink-Cycle... _"And that one looks like a One Who Speaks Twice biting themselves."**bandhin**? That could worâ€"no, wait...I can't actually use that one...dammit! _"Those three look like a clutch of One Who Reap Death eggs." _**Ä•ch** would work if I were near a better source of water and light. **bracchÄ«on** is too specific and I have no formal Alteration training so it would be foolish to try._ "That is a hopbeast."_ The only one I could work right is **spÄ"wan** and even that as a long-shot. I'm starting to wish I was better at Alteration Tha'um..._

The featherbeasts called out as they fluttered above me which alerted me to the time. "Great," I groaned, taking note of His Bright Eye's position in His Underbelly, "I've already wasted almost half the Bright-Cycle. Not good...not good..."

I rolled over, wincing at the soreness of stiff muscles, and stood up. A sudden and sharp snapping sound alerted me to something approaching my position. Judging by the angle of the sound from where I was sitting, it was about fifty paces downwind from me. I slipped down so I was belly-to-the-ground and slunk over towards the source. The wind shifted and I got a strong whiff of ash, fire, trees, Ringing Midgard, and...

Fish!

But...why did the Skenndar cub have fish with him?! _What are you playing at?_ I slipped over to a piece of Midgard above the cub's eye-level and hunkered down so he wouldn't see me.

"_Ugh...Ã‰g trÃ°i ekki aÃ°o Ã©g er aÃ°o gera Ã¾etta...Ã©g Ã¾arf aÃ°o vera hnetur,_" the cub yipped loudly. Was he alone? Who was he communicating with? Were Skenndar smart enough to communicate?

When he came into view, he was hidden behind a large not-scale made of tree and Ringing Midgard, clearly alone. "_Hiksti,_" he churred, "_Ãžegar Ã¾Ã° skjÃ³ta niÃºur dreka, ekki fara aÃ°o leita aÃ°o Ã¾vÃ-. Ef Ã¾Ã° gerir Ã¾aÃ°o, drepa drekann. Ef Ã¾Ã° drepa ekki drekann, ekki fara aÃ°o leita aÃ°o Ã¾vÃ- aftur. Og ef Ã¾Ã° skyldir svo aÃ°o finna drekann Ã¾Ã° vilt lÃ¡ta fara, ekki, undir neinum kringumstÃ|Ã°um, aÃ°o koma aftur nÃ¡sta dag og reyna aÃ°o fÃ|Ã°a Ã¾aÃ°o!_"

When he pulled forward to step into the bottom of the Fire Mouth, his not-scale caught on two pieces of Midgard that were jutting out from the wall. He pulled at it for a bit and, when it was obvious that it was not moving, let out a sad little roar. "_Bara frÃ; bÃ|rt...Ã‰g bÃ½st viÃ° aÃ°o Ã©g Ã|tla aÃ°o fara Ã- varnarlaust._" He tossed the fish over the not-scale and climbed under it, growling the entire time. "_Allt annaÃ°o, Loki? Ãžar sem Ã¾Ã° virÃ°ist vera aÃ°o njÃ³ta kvÃ¶l mÃ-na! Ertu viss um aÃ°o er ekki eitthvaÃ°o annaÃ°o sem Ã¾Ã° vilt aÃ°o kasta leiÃ°o mÃ-na? Ã‰g efast Ã- dag gÃ|ti fengiÃ°o mikiÃ°o

verri_!"

The fish overwhelmed my senses, setting my mouth to drooling and my guard at low. I slunk forward a little by farther and, when he was just far enough that he couldn't run, I slipped out of my hiding place and stared him down.

Silverflesh... I moaned internally as I stared at the large silver fish handing from his forepaw. Food... I slowly stepped forward, paw after paw until I was within biting range. _I could take off his paw... _I thought blearily, most of my mind focused on the easy food in front of me. Using so many Tha'um in a row, on top of using an Alteration Tha'um while severely injured, then injuring myself further had drained my energy reserves and I desperately needed food. And the fish he had...was so...tasty...looking...

The wind shifted and I caught the piercing scent of Ringing Midgard. I snorted and glared at the cub. "How dare you?! Are you trying to kill me?"

Of course he's trying to kill you. He's a Skenndar and he shot you down, reason argued. _The food was a ploy to get you to drop your guard._

"And it almost worked," I growled at him, snout wrinkling. I backtracked a few paces and glared at him. I should disfigure him for trying to harm me. _I should kill him for trying to harm me!_

His eyes darted down to the folds of his not-fur and he pulled it back with his free forepaw, revealing a not-fang made of a brilliant Ringing Midgard and prongbeast hide. I hissed at him, making my displeasure known.

"Just drop the damn fish and get away!" I warned.

Surprisingly though, without breaking eye contact, the cub dropped the not-fang onto Midgard and, with a quick look of disapproval from me, picked it up with his hind-paw and tossed it into the lake.
"_Betri?_"

I plopped my hindquarters down and stared at him with the most disarmingly adorable look I could._ Give me the fish and go._

His facial muscles relaxed as his guard lowered and he leaned in to give me the fish. I opened my mouth as his forepaw extended the fish towards me, teeth sheathed. "_Tannlaus? En Åg hefÃºi getaÃº svariÃº aÃº Å¾Ãº hefÃºir..._" I unsheathed my teeth with a snap and snatched the fish from his paw, choking it down in two bites.
"_...tennurnar...,_ he yipped in surprise.

It was bigger than the fish in the lake and, ohh..., it was saltwater! It was so good! I moaned in appreciation and smacked my lips in appreciation.

Maybe, if I buttered up this Skenndar, I would have a steady supply of fish. I looked back at him and noticed how thin he was. Maybe he was hungry too and I took his meal! My Birthing-Mother would be angry with me!

Damn. I could hear her growling her disapproval now, smacking me

upside the head with her tail and scolding me for taking from someone less fortunate than I. _Less fortunate...yeah right..._

I stepped forward until the Skenndar cub fell on his tail-less behind, back against the wall of the Fire Mouth. "I'm going to reward you, so you better accept it Skenndar," I growled. He yipped in terror and I drew sick pleasure from the fear rolling off himâ€"though no piddle this time. Regardless, now that I was closer, and the threat was greatly reduced, I took some time to observe the Skenndar's form and build. He was thin like a sapling, he had small paws, his head was oblong, his snout round and flat, andâ€"like other Skenndarâ€"his fangs were crooked and blunt. He had no means of defence now that he had dropped the not-fang into the lake, the fur atop his head was the colour of a Cloak's scales, his peach-fuzz hide was spattered with freckles much like my own, and his eyes were still that piercing green.

The cloying smell of fire, trees, ash, and Ringing Midgard filled my nostrils and I kept eye contact with him before I finally decided._ I'm going to give you some of your food back. Call it a gesture of goodwill._

My entire snout scrunched up as I forcibly activated my gag reflex to regurgitate the sea-fish. "Hhhk..." _You better be glad thatâ€" _Hhhk..."_â€"my Birthing-Mother taught me toâ€" _Hhhk..."_â€"repay kindness with kindness._

The upper-half of the fish landed at his feet and he looked down at it, then back at me. "_Uh...er Å¾etta fyrir mig?_"

_You didn't kill me, so I didn't kill you. _I assured him mentallyâ€"though I really was thinking this for reassurance in my self-control. _You fed me, so I'm feeding you. Eat! _I nudged the fish to his hindquarters. He picked it up in his forepaws and gave me a crooked baring of his fangs.

"_Heh ... Å¾akka ... Å¾Ã°_?" Was he angry with me? Why was he baring his nubby little fangs? But...he didn't smell like anger...he smelled normal. Was it a weird Skenndar gesture of happiness then?

I nodded at the fish and smacked my lips to try and communicate my meaning to him. _Eat the damn fish before I shame my ancestors and eat you. _His hide paled slightly.

"_ÅžÃ° ... Å¾Ã° vilt mig til aÃ° borÃ°a Å¾etta?! Å‰g...uh...ja, ef Å©g vil ekki aÃ° borÃ°a mig, Å©g Å|tti aÃ° gera Å¾aÃ° sem Å¾Ã° vilt mig til._" He chirped to himself, then took a large bit out of the silverflesh. He purred and nodded as he chewed, trying to signify his appreciation of my gift.

When he didn't swallow, I prompted him by exaggerating the motion. _I am mere seconds away from stealing the fish from you. If you don't appreciate it, I'll eat it instead._

He paled and began growling in distress through the mouthful of fish. "_Ã" nei. Nei...takk...Ã³. Å‰-Å©g verÃ° aÃ° kyngja, ekki Å©g? GuÃ°...vel, hÃ©r fer!_" He chewed some more and then swallowed, tilting his head back slightly to allow the large chunk of meat to slide down his tiny throat. I was satisfied.

He gave me another nubby-fang-bare and I finally realised what it was: a disarming gesture! If you bare your fangs and bear no ill will, your enemy will never see your attack coming! Fangs sheathed, I mimicked the gesture, pulling the corners of my mouth up and away from my gums. It was weird, but the Skenndar seemed to like it. He reached out, forepaw a breath away from my snout.

"Back off!" I growled at him, leaping and half-gliding over to my coal-bed to lay down for a mid-Cycle nap. "Me giving you food doesn't mean you can touch me, Skenndar!" I blew a stream of fire to heat up the coals and laid down, tail wrapped around my snout like I normally do when I go to sleep. As I tried to drift off by counting woolbeasts, I felt a niggling sensation in my Mind's Eye. It was a Form, bright and present; I wasn't sure who it was, but they were getting very close to me.

My eyes snapped open and I flicked away my tail just in time to see the Skenndar twirl in the other direction and make featherbeast noises as he walked away. What...? Skenndar don't have Forms! That's ridiculous.

"What does a Draconis have to do to get some sleep around here?" I grumbled as I stood up, hop-glided over to the side of the Fire-Mouth opposite the Skenndar, and wrapped my tail around a tree branch. Ancestor, grant me solace in your embrace. Allow me to heal and draw energy from your roots to further my growth. There is truth in song. I dangled from the branch and slowly drifted to sleep.

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Once upon a time, for that is how all tales begin, there was a Skenndar skald named Clarity of His Voice who committed a heinous crime.

There was nothing the Skenndar were denied among their Draconic brethren. If they needed food, the Draconis would allow them to hunt alongside them. If they desired hides and fur for warmth, the Draconis would kill a prongbeast or thumpbeast and leave it whole for the Skenndar to process as they would. They were on equal terms with the Draconis they lived among; so much so that certain Skenndar and Draconis formed bonds, sharing the name Bond-Brother.

Clarity was Bond-Brother to the skald of their Home, a One Who Wears Death named Abrasion of His Scales. They, while not conventionally normal Bond-Brothers, shared a certain level of understanding for, not only was Abrasion the Home's skald, but the protector of La Bella. What Clarity always understood was that the Skenndar of her tribe could ask for anything and share anything the Draconis had, except for La Bella.

The two tribes lived in peace for some time, but everything changed when a great illness befell the Skenndar. Dozens died and more still became sick very quickly. Not even the Tha'um of the Great Elder was helping, nor were the prayers the Skenndar sent up to their Great Ones. Time and time again, her tribe came to Clarity and demanded to know if there was anything in song that spoke of a cure to diseases like this. Time and time again, Clarity replied that no, there was no such 'miracle cure'. This persisted for quite some while.

Then Clarity's firstborn died of the disease.

She spoke up then. "We have been given anything we desire by the Draconis," she proclaimed. "If we ask for food, they give us a feast; if we ask for furs, they slaughter every beast close by; if we ask for large stones for building, they uproot and blast apart Midgard for us; yet they have been holding back on us!"

_ "What? What?!" The Skenndar clamoured._

_ "I have been told by my Bond-Brother that there was one thing I could not ask for."_

_ "What? What?!" They cried._

_ "La Bella, the Great Egg that rests in the centre of the Fire-Mouth," Clarity cried out. "That has been denied to us and that must be their secret! That must be the Draconic way to long life and little sickness! We must ask of our Bond-Brothers that they share La Bella with us!"_

_ And so the Skenndar rallied and they asked their Bond-Brothers to share La Bella with them. Horrified when the news reached his ears, Abrasion confronted Clarity with ferocity._

_ "You have asked for the impossible! You have filled their heads with falsehoods! You know that La Bella does not do that!"_

_ "Ah, but La Bella is precious to your people, no?" Clarity shot back._

_ "True," Abrasion admitted, "but why would that matter?"_

_ "My firstborn was precious to me; their children and family were precious to them. If the Draconis truly care, they will give up their precious in penance for letting ours die."_

_ Abrasion knew that Clarity was mad with grief, so heâ€"with much regretâ€"drove the Skenndar away, saying they could no longer live so close to Her. They left willingly, but would not give up._

_ That Blink-time, when all the Draconis slept, Clarity and a select few snuck into the Fire Mouth and smashed open La Bella in an attempt to find out the Draconis' secret. Instead of a secret, they were met with the Great Father's wrath in the form of the Heartfire of the Fire Mouth blasting upward and killing them, turning them into permanent statues of Midgard, ash, and death. He then cursed the Skenndar to be dumb beasts for all of eternity for their sins against the Great Mother. They would never again be Bond-Brothers with the Draconis._

_ The Draconis wept for their loss yet, in the midst of the mourning and cursing and gnashing of fangs, from the plume of Heartfire came a Voice. The Voice was pure as His Breath and strong as Ringing Midgard. It said, **Do not weep my children, for I am not dead. I am merely sleeping. One Bright-Cycle the time will come and I will return to guide you in the ways of the pure. You will, through me, become one with the Great Father. Everything will be alright. Do not weep for me just yet.**_

And the Draconis, sorrow forgotten, leapt for joy. Their Great Mother was alive and one day She would return to herald a new era in. Everything would be just fine.

There is truth in song.

****xxx}-|||)xxx(fsh)xxx****

A blinding Form in my Mind's Eye jolted me awake, the lingering scent of the Skenndar taunting me. I slid my tail free of the branch and dropped down on all fours, wincing at the twinge in my ribs. Just a twinge though, thankfully. Thank you for the energy you let me borrow, Ancestor. It will be put to good use. There is truth in Song.

I closed my Mind's Eye and opened my physical eyes. His Bright-Eye was low on the horizon and, from what I could tell, there was no chance of His Tears falling tonight. As I scanned the Fire Mouth for any trace of the Skenndar, I caught sight of him sitting on a large hunk of Midgard, a tree-bit in his forepaws. What are you doing?

I crawled towards him and sat on my haunches behind him, watching what he was doing. He had the tree-bit in his forepaws and was dragging it in the dirt, creating lines and ridges that looked a bit like my face. His scent changed from its normal mix to one tinged with surprise and worry but he didn't meet my eyes as he continued to scratch my face into the dirt.

_Is this some sort of show of trust? If I do this, will you bring me more fish? _I pondered. Dead-set on getting more food, as my stomach let out a loud complain and cramped, I dashed over to the tree I had slept in and offered a quick apology. _My sincerest regrets, Ancestor, but I am hungry and this might speed up the food retrieval process. Please forgive me for what I am about to do. There is truth in song. _I tore off the branch I hung off of while sleeping and dragged it over to where the Skenndar sat. Looking at him and taking in his features, I began to draw his visage in the dirt. Twisting and turning, I danced across Midgard on my hind legs with the branch in my mouth, carving his face into the dirt using the same technique he did. When I finished, adding the dot-like pupils in his eyes as a final touch, I spat the tree out and set it ablaze with a single firebolt._ Give the Great Father my regards, Ancestor._

The Skenndar churred in surprise and stood up, eyes taking in my masterpiece. "_Hvað er Þú? Sagði hann afrita bara mig? Er hann að reyna að senda? Ætta-ætta er svo flott! Ægg get ekki træða Þú- að ætta er að gerast! Fyrst Ætur hann af minni hendi og ekki drepa mig - Þúriðja sinn; en nái er hann að reyna að hafa samband við mig!_" He stepped forward, right onto my drawing and I growled.

"Back off, yolk-brain! I didn't plod all over your drawing, so why do this to mine?!" He pulled his hind paw off the line, then placed it back. "What did I say," I snapped. He toed the line again, as if he were testing my boundaries and I growled, "Do you want to lose that foot?!"

The threat seemed to do the trick because the Skenndar began dancing and twirling inside my drawing, forepaws thrown out in balance and hind paws landing perfectly in the negative space. Soon he reached

me, landing back against my chest, and looked up. He bared his fangs again and held out his forepaw.

"No," I snorted, "back off!"

Suddenly, as if he understood me, he pulled his paw back and kept eye contact with me. Was he challenging me? Then, slowly, he closed his eyes and left his forepaw breaths away from my snout. What are you doing?

He didn't smell like a challenger, nor did he reek of fear. Even his cloying natural scent seemed watered down and pleasant. "Are you asking?" I mulled over what had happened. Food was no longer a main focus, in fact it wasn't even prominent in my mind. All there was to focus on was the Skenndar and myself. I nudged my snout into his cupped paw and closed my eyes.

I felt his fingers shift around my nose and rub my upper snout. He exhaled in awe, "*****We were wrong about you...*****"

Of course youâ€"wait...did you just talk?! But...Skenndar can't talk! I pulled away from him and snorted to get his scent out of my nostrils._ You aren't normal! That - that can't happen! That's not natural!_ "*****Stay away from me, Skenndar!*****" I glided away as fast as my crippled status would allow, retreating to the farthest corner of the Fire Mouth.

The Skenndar stood there, stunned, and then walked away. As he retreated from my position and began to scale the Fire Mouth wall, he churred, "*****Did he just talk?*****"

5. Tannlaus og BergmÃ¡l af DjÃºpum Ã-skra Hans

******(A/N: Once again I'd like to point out that all of my Viking-speak comes from Google Translated Icelandic, so do not, by any means, take that as accurate. Also, my lovely moirail Raxi pointed out that, with all the Viking-speak I was putting in these chapters you wouldn't be able to understand Hiccup. This is an excellent point. However, soon enough you will no longer need to worry about missing what Hiccup is saying. If you really want to know, there's always Google Translate. I'm lazy in that I'm not going to provide you with a translation key. It's too much fun to watch you struggle... ;)******

******Second: I am sorry this took so long and even sorrier for that poor person whom I promised a New Year's chapter to Defying the Norm to. Real Life is a sadistic bitch and she's kicking my ass. That and I've decided to work on an RPG (though I'm waiting on the plot for that, so it's on hold indefinitely). I should update Defying the Norm next and it will be glorious. I apologise.******

******I hope y'all enjoy this chapter and all the interesting things that happen in it. Please leave a review when you can, okay? Thank you.******

He came back the next Bright-Cycle bearing more fish. I didn't understand why this scrawny Skenndar was going to such lengths to appease me, but he was. It was right after His Bright Eye had peaked in His Underbelly; all of my attempts to catch fish had been fruitless when I heard and smelled him again.

"_Ã‰g vona aÃ° hann hafi ekki borÃ°a mig,_" he chattered to himself.
"_vegna Ã¾ess aÃ° ekki aÃ°eins myndi Ã¾aÃ° setja damper Ã¡; Ã¡;formum
mÃ—num til aÃ° sanna mig til pabba, en Ã©g myndi aldrei vera fÃ¶r um
aÃ° reikna Ã°t hvers vegna hel Ã©g gÃ¶ti skiliÃ° hann! PlÃ°s Ã©g
myndi vera dauÃ°ur._"

For some reason, I couldn't understand him like I could the Bright-Cycle before, though I could pick up on his mild distress and dark amusement. _Maybe that was just a bad dream,_ I reasoned. _After all, Skenndar can't talk. Everyone knows that!_

Still...the eventsâ€"or dreamâ€"of last Bright-Cycle bothered me. It had felt so real! Worst of all, right after I woke up from sleeping, but before I checked my wounds, I saw the remains of my drawing. So what did that mean? That Skenndar could talk?! That they weren't dumb beasts? What?!

Regardless, the Skenndar cub came back and instead of a single fish, he brought a whole carry-thing full of them! I watched him come to the pond, drop the carry-thing, and cup his forepaws around his snout. "_Tannlaus! Leiddi Ã©g yÃ°ur mat! Hellingur og hellingur af fiski! Yum, Yum!_"

_Does he expect me to come because he's calling me? Stupid Skenndar.... Regardless of my mild misgivings, I bounded over to him and gave him that toothless face he liked so much. "Food?" I chirruped.

"_HallÃ³,_" he returned the facial expression, baring his nubby fangs at me. "_Ã¡;nÃ¶gÃ° aÃ° sjÃ¡; mig, ha?_" I sensed that he was...happy to see me?

"Are you happy to see me? Is that why you brought a lot of fish?" I asked, bending down to eat a pretty-looking fish. Mmm...it was tasty too!

In response to my questionâ€"I am assuming since everyone knows Skenndar are dumb beastsâ€"he threw his forepaws up and let them drop, growling in frustration. "_Hiksti, hvaÃ° ert Ã¾Ã° aÃ° gera? TalaÃ° drekiâ€"sem Ã¾Ã° leiddir bara heilt kÃ¶rfu af Ã¾orpinu er minnkandi framboÃ° Ã¡; fiski tilâ€"og lÃ¡;ta Ã¾aÃ° lifa Ã¡; meÃ°an Ã¾aÃ° borÃ°ar? AÃ° auki,_ he sighed deeply and placed his head in his forepaws as he sat down on the jutting rock from yesterday, "_drekar geta ekki talaÃ°. Og jafnvel ef Ã¾eir gerÃ°u, Ã¾eir vissulega myndi ekki vera aÃ° tala viÃ°ig._"

He seemed sad. Something in me stirred and I felt...angry at whatever it was that was making this Skenndar cub upset. I let out a low growl as I came over and placed one of the fishâ€"whole this timeâ€"at his hind paws. "***Don't be sad. Have some fish.***"

He blinked at me, confused and scared. "_Vis-vissir Ã¾Ã° talar bara...aftur? GoÃ°in skulu toying meÃ° mÃ¶r._"

"**You know, if you're going to disrespect me by not eating that fish, I _will_ eat you. **" I chided, horking down another fish.

Suddenly he scampered away from me on all fours. He reeked of fear

and his nubby fangs were bared, but not in the same way as usual. This time it looked like he was in pain; the corners of his mouth were turned down and he was trembling slightly. "_ÃžÃ° getur talaÃ°! ÃžÃ° ert djÃ¶full! **Stay away from me!**_"

I froze mid-swallow, filled from snout to tail-fin with dread. I wasn't dreaming this time; he actually spoke and it was something I could understand. _Shit...._ "Great," I chuffed, "**all this time** we thought Skenndar were dumb beasts and it just so turns out **we were wrong!** Now I'm having a cordial conversation with the **simpering Skenndar that shot off my tail-fin and grounded me** and no other Draconis will know that I am here, let alone that Skenndar aren't as stupid as we first thought!"

Through my entire rant the Skenndar cub had been laying on Midgard with the most horrified look possible on his face. He seemed frozen in place and some times he would tense up further and fear would roll off of him in droves. He let out a piteous squeak, "_**Please don't eat me...**_"

I snorted, still perturbed by the thought of being able to understand him, but trying to pass it off as nothing. "I'm not **going to eat you.**"

The cub let out a shrill cry and leapt to his hind-paws, scrambling to get away from me. He was terrified and frantic now, broadcasting his emotions on the wind like there was no Bright-Cycle to follow this one. "_DvÃ¶l burt frÃ¡; mÃ¶r! FaÃ°ir hans var rÃ©tt! Ã¶g Ã¡tti aÃ° hafa alrei reynt aÃ° verÃ°a vinir meÃ° AÃ¾Ã¶r! **I should go home and forget all about you!**_"

I ran in front of him, blocking him off, and snarled, "Pardon me? _You_ forgot about _me_?!"

Whatever communication we had, it was obviously not there anymore; he tried to get away from me again only to have me scoop him up by the scruff of his not-furâ€"fangs retractedâ€"and plop him down back by our pictures.

"Look," I sighed, trying to get ahold of myself. "Whatever it is that's happening to us, **I have no idea. But it's new, and it's strange, and we need to do something about it.**"

"_ÃžÃ° hefur ekki hugmynd um hvaÃ°? HvaÃ° er aÃ° gerast viÃ° mig?_" He chittered. At first it seemed as if he still didn't understand me, and that I was grasping at dreams, but then he spoke and I understood him. "_**We...need to do something about it? You mean, you can understand me as well as I can understand you?**_"

Thank the Great Father something got through! I nodded and nudged him with my forepaw, "Do you honestly think you're the only one affected by...whatever this is? **Impudent cub.**"

He barked in surprise and indignation, "_Finnst AÃ¾Ã¶r aÃ° AÃ¾Ã°, stÃ³r, meina dreki, eru Ã— hvaÃ°a stÃ¶ru til aÃ° kalla mig nÃ¶fnum? **I highly doubt you're any older than I am.** ViÃ° the vegur, hvaÃ° er nafn Ã¾itt?_" I got another one of those fang-bearing expressions from him, only this one seemed insincere and kinda rude.

He seemed to have adjusted to the situation rather quickly. I cuffed

him upside the head with a forepaw and then went back to eating. Fish can't go to waste after all. It would be rude. When his scent didn't fade, I turned back to face him. "You can go now! I'm no longer a hatchling; I don't need someone to watch me eat."

"_LÃ-ta, aÃ° viÃ°o Ã¾urfum aÃ° reikna Ã°t einhvers konar jafnvÃ|gi hÃ©r. ÃžÃ° getur ekki bara hÃ³ta aÃ° borÃ°a mig eina mÃ-nÃ°tu og sÃ-Ã°an fariÃ° aftur aÃ° borÃ°a eins og ef Ã¾aÃ° gerÃ°ist aldreinÃ|st. **You and I need to find some sort of compromise, both in attitude and in communication,**" he asserted. I was impressed; not many Draconis have the strength to stand up to a Shadow, let alone Skenndar.

I sighed and finished the fish in my mouth. "Fine, fine...pushy..." Whether or not he understood me is unknown, but he seemed to get the gist of my groaning because he let out a sort of bark-trill noise.

"_ÃžÃ° ert Ã- raun ekki allir eldri en Ã©g, Ã¾Ã° ert?_"

"Whatever it is you just said, I'm sure it was mocking me," I grumbled. "Now...**let's see if we can figure out this whole...communication...thing**"

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Long song short, we didn't. From what I gathered, us understanding each other was sporadic at best and infuriatingly random at worst. I tried several ways of creating this odd occurrenceâ€"talking to the Skenndar cub, talking at the Skenndar cub, getting angry, remaining calm, hatchling-talk, the biggest words I knowâ€"and nothing seemed consistent. In the end, all I managed to do is find a good name for the cub that I share this gift with.

I have started calling him "Echo of His Deep Roar" because his weird Skenndar-talk sounds just like a bastard variation of the Old Tongue; Echo for short.

It may seem weird to name a Skenndarâ€"especially if you remember the old saying "if you give it a name, you'll get attached to it"â€"but my circumstance was unusual already. Why not throw in a name for a Skenndar while I'm already downed in a Fire Mouth, crippled, being fed by a Skenndar, and talking to a Skenndar. Honestly, it's the least unusual part of my experience.

Regardless, His Bright Eye fell low over Midgard and Echo left to go back to his nest. He tried to touch me on the snout again but after what happened last time, I'm more than a little reluctant to let him. Instead I swatted his forepaw away and snorted, letting him know through body language that touching was a no-go. He made that weird bark-trill noise again and raised his fore-haunches to touch his ears, giving off an air of nonchalance.

"_JÃ|ja, ekki aÃ° snerta. SjÃ|umst Ã; morgun Tannlaus!_" With that he exited the Fire-Mouth, carry-thing on his back. I watched his figure recede until all that was left of him was his lingering scent; a smell of fire, trees, ash, and Ringing Midgard that brought me peace.

Upon his departure, I walked over to the lake and cleaned myself off,

paying extra attention to my still-healing tailfin. My scales were coming in nicely and, despite the incessant itching that plagued my nights, I prevented myself from scratching the rough patches on my skin where the lacerations were. As the cool water washed over my skin and wounds I thought about this Bright-Cycle. Who'dve thought that within the span of a few Bright-Cycles I would go from the reluctant tool of a demon in the guise of our Great Mother, to the somewhat confused, possible friend of the Skenndar who had shot me down and crippled me.

You work in mysterious ways, Great Father, and for that I am immensely greatful.

I was no longer alone. Although I couldn't quite understand Echo all the time, he still seemed to like visiting me and talking to (at?) me. Moreover, I was learning that all we thought we knew about the Skenndar was wrong; they are not dumb beasts, they are capable of coherent speech, and not all of them will kill a Draconis upon sight. There are some good Skenndar. There are Skenndar out there like Echo.

Washed, fed, and thoroughly worn out from dealing with Echo's little freak-out, I warmed my bed of coals and watched His Bright Eye sink low over Midgard, bathing His Underbelly with the colours of His Fire. My eyelids drooped and my breathing began to even out as sleep overtook me. Great Father, hear my Song. You are strong, You are mighty, and You are wonderful. Thank you for all You have blessed me with. Please safely watch over my Form while I sleep and protect me from harm. Also, I added, feeling very much like a cub again as I finished my prayer to the Great Father, please watch over Echo as well. Although I am unsure as to whether or not he has a Form, he is the only companion I have at the moment. Despite my previous misgivings, I have come to enjoy his presence and do not wish for any harm to befall him. There is truth in Song.

Sleep soon overtook me and I drifted into the land of dreams.

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I was standing in a circle of Draconis, talking to them.

"Are you sure?" The Bonehead asked me, her voice soft and tinted with the faintest of Old Tongue accents.

"Absolutely," I replied, "There's no reason it wouldn't work."

"Why should we trust you, Shadow?" The Cloak asked, sneering at me haughtily. "You were downed and yet here you are, alive and well, not mad, and wearing a not-fin made of Ringing Midgard and prongbeast hide. You could be in league with the Skenndar and trying to get us killed!"

"What would warrant such treason?!" I screeched, holding back fire in my throat.

"You **did** renounce our Great Mother," the Twice noted. Its brother nodded in agreement and I could feel my patience slipping away piece-by-piece.

_ "But I'm **telling you**, that **thing** is not our Great Mother!" _

_ "***Blasphemy!***" They chorused._

_ Their voices clamoured and rose, blending until all I could hear were gutteral roars and snarls, not words. I left my body and stood above myself, staring at the group of Draconis arguing. I let out a sigh and placed my head in my forepaws, **Skenndar** forepaws._

_ "Kannski var Æsetta ekki gÃ³ð hugmynd eftir allt saman... Æeir virÃºast reiÃºur. Æg Ã|tti aÃº segja Tannlaus aÃº aftur burt. Drekar og menn geta ekki hugsanlega vinna saman eins og Æsetta... ÆaÃº er ÆmÃ¶gulegt ..." _

_ It's impossible..._

6. Samskipti er lykillinn

(A/N: Happy April! Congratulations to all of you who read this because you are now the proud recipients of a new chapter! I've been on a writing binge for a while so expect some chapters to come out pretty close together. I think I updated Defying the Norm late March/early April?

Ah well...I'm on a fricking roll! There's less story but more plot and backstory in this chapter. it was necessary. It needed to happen. Please leave reviews if you like this.

Let me know if my "Viking-speak" is horribly incorrect or not. Also, have fun :) School is ending soon!)

It wasn't until mid-Bright-cycle that Echo returned to visit me, another carry-thing of fish on his back. I had spent the cycle alternating between catching fish on my own and practicing my gliding. There was no point in becoming so dependant on Echo that I could no longer get my own food, nor was there any point to stop trying to re-learn how to fly. Stabiliser fin or not, I was going to fly again.

Echo walked into the Fire Mouth and bared his fangs, "HallÃ³ Tannlaus. Æg sÃ© aÃº ÆÃ³ hefur veriÃº upptekinn._"

"Hello Echo. I see you've been thinking of me," I mimicked the expression as I stepped down from the jutting piece of Midgard I was standing on.

He dropped the carry-thing down and opened the top, revealing the large bounty of fish inside. I inhaled deeply as I surveyed my meal; there were all sorts of fish, from saltwater to freshwater, and they all smelled delicious. ***Thanks.***

He bared his fangs again, tilting his head to the side. "_**You're welcome.**_"

While our communication remained somewhat inconsistent, it was nice to understand him every once in a while. He seemed like a nice enough

Skenndar...as ridiculous as that seemed. I dug into the fish and horked them down with vim and vigour. I needed to build up my strength if I was going to fly my way out of here; and I was going to fly my way out of here.

As I ate, Echo sat down on a piece of Midgard and began to draw in a folded-up thing that smelled like trees and fire with a small burnt stick. When I finished, I padded over to him and watched him draw. If he sensed me, he made no move to acknowledge me, and he continued on with his work.

It was me, or at least an approximation of me. Echo was drawing me fully stretched out but in the place of my missing fin he was drawing in a crude mock-up of one. I snorted and pushed his forepaw away from the folded up thing that smelled like trees. "No." I asserted, remembering my dream from last Bright-cycle.

"_Nei?_" He churred, confused.

"**No.**" I repeated. Echo blinked and then bared his fangs.

"Nnnnnu?" He slurred. "_Er Å¾aÅ° satt?_"

Hold on. Did he just talk? As in speak Draco?! What?! Granted, his pronunciation was atrocious, even for a simple word like "no". But still! I shook myself, unfurling my wings and making myself loose in confusion. I'm pretty sure Skenndar didn't understand Draco, even Echo, but body language they seemed to get.

"You just said 'no'!" I nudged him with my nose and knocked him over on his side.

"_JÃ|ja Å©g gerÃ|i greinilega eitthvaÅ° rÃ©tt vegna Å¾ess aÅ° Å¾Ã° virÃ°ist Å;nÃ|gÃ°ur._" He yipped and trilled as I snorted into his head-fur. "Nnnnu!" He barked as he pushed my snout away from his snout. I smacked him on the head with my forepaw and snorted.

"No," I enunciated clearly.

"Nnnno?"

"No," I corrected.

"Nu?" He tried a third time, still mispronouncing the word.

I snorted and slumped my fore-haunches in defeat. "**You're hopeless, you know?**"

"_Hey! Ekki gefast upp strax! ViÅ° vorum aÅ° fÃ¡; einhvers staÅ°ar!**We were communicating!**_" Echo leapt to his hind paws and snatched the folded tree-thing from the ground along with his charred tree-bit. "_Look: no._"

Using the un-burnt end of the tree-bit, he scratched something into Midgard and pointed to it once he was done. "Nu," he barked, getting my attention.

I stared at the scribbles in the ground and tilted my head to the side. "What?"

"Nu!" He barked again, pointing to the scribbles. "_ÃžaÃ° Ä¾Ä½Ã°ir ekkert!_"

"No?" I asked, gesturing with one paw at the scribbles. He trilled and bounced up and down.

"_JÃ¡! ÃžaÃ° er rÃ©tt! ÃžaÃ° er hvernig Ä¾Ã° skrifar ekki!_" I didn't quite get why he was so happy. Sure, the little scribbles in the ground meant no, but that was nothing to get all worked up over.

"Look Echo, **that's neat** but I need to practice my flying so I can get out of here. **I don't want to be grounded forever.**" I pulled away from him and walked to the opposite side of the Fire Mouth. Stepping on a large jutting rock, I spread my wings and began to try to glide. Despite managing to get much farther than I had in past attempts, I still was pulling short of what was considered a "proper" glide. If anything, I had all the control and glide time of a yearling. Frankly, it was rather embarrassing.

When I stopped trying to glide, muscles screaming with exhaustion, I padded over to my makeshift nest and relit the coals. Curling in on myself, I smelled the wind to see if Echo was still here but his scent was faint. It seemed like he had left quite some time ago. However, he had left the scribbles in Midgard; the ones that meant "no" in Skenndar-speak. _Hm...weird Skenndar,_ I thought as I pulled my tail over my snout and tried to take a mid-cycle nap. I was tired and sore and there was no better way to take the edge off than by sleeping a bit and working more on my gliding skills later.

Soon I drifted off into the realm of sleep.

xxx}-|||)xxx(fsh)xxx

I stood at attention, tail held high, and waited for my lesson with Her. As I waited, one of the Old Ones, a Cloak five times my elder, passed by me. When he saw me waiting alone on a ledge near the Heartfire, he came over to talk to me.

_ "I wouldn't suggest doing that, young Shadow," he croaked._

I remained at attention, but turned my head to watch him. His scales were a dull muddy colour, one of his horns had broken off, and all of his teeth were the colour of a Snip-Snap. I replied as I faced forward again, "Doing what?"

_ "Talking to that thing." He moved closer and I could smell death on his breath. "It will eat you without a second thought and tell everyone that you were a turnscale. It is far too vicious like that."_

A low warning growl built in my chest. "She is not a thing. She is La Bella. She is our Great Mother and you would do well to watch your tongue. That is the talk of a true turnscale."

_ "I am merely looking out for our young. If all of our hatchlings grow up with that thing in their heads and call that thing La Bella like you, then we are doomed. The Home of Our Ancestors cannot

survive under its rule if it continues to eat all of our food."__

"We offer to Her only what She deserves: the first harvest. If you have an issue with that, then you can leave Our Home and go elsewhere." I retorted.__

"Trell drest vikan'n sasken. Brita'k drest vikan'n zetsaak!" the Cloak spat. Despite having only rudimentary knowledge of Old Tongue, I knew what he said was very wrong. He was insulting Her.__

I leapt on the Cloak Old One and dug my fangs into the scruff of his neck where he couldn't reach me. He spat liquid fire and hissed as he flailed about, trying to dislodge me to no avail. As he continued to buck, I dug in deeper and drew blood. With a scream of rage, the Cloak Old One lit himself on fire and finally managed to shake me off.__

Blood running down his neck and back, eyes wild, and body shimmering with flames, the Cloak Old One snarled at me. "Caest Draconis sangris! Shivet! Sangris tenk sangris!"__

Just as he was going to pounce on me and most likely end my life, She reared up from the Heartfire and integrated the Cloak Old One in one swift movement. I stood there, basking in Her presence for a few breaths. I felt Her turn Her gaze to me and bowed deeply out of respect.__

"Why were you fighting with that Old One, my Shadow?"__

I was filled with regret. "Great Mother, I humbly beg your forgiveness! I know it is wrong to quarrel with others of Our Home, but the Old One insulted you. As Your Shadow, I could not let a verbal attack such as that one slide. I had to punish him, for You."__

She watched me, making no noise as She did so, until She bent down to nudge me with Her snout. "I understand why you did what you did, my Shadow. However, before you Guard me, you must first learn to fight. That is why I called you here in the first place, to arrange for you to have a combat teacher."__

I was elated. "Truly?! You would do that?!" When She chuckled, I ducked back into my bow, worried I had done something wrong.__

"I cannot teach you everything. Just as a Scout has a Scout teacher, you must have a Guard teacher. In Our Home is a One Who Swims in Midgard who will teach you combat. While her body type is not like yours, she has had experience fighting many Shadows who would try to harm Me. She knows of their fighting styles and can instruct you to fight like the best of them. Will you accept the Midgard-Swimmer as your combat teacher?"__

Although she was seemingly offering me a choice, there was no choice involved. Though the clan of His Blinking Eye had always had a feud with Midgard-Swimmers, I could put that aside in order to please Her. Anything...I would do anything for Her.__

"Of course, Great Mother," I deepened my bow and fanned my wings out wide, showing the utmost of subservience to Her. "I will gladly

accept the Midgard-Swimmer as my combat teacher." _

_ She laughed, a beautiful sound like His Breath through tree leaves.

Good. Now shall we start our Tha'um lesson? Do you remember where we left off? _

_ "Of course I do Great Mother! We were working on Destruction Tha'um like gjÃ³str that would aid in defeating Skenndar from far away!" _

_ **Of course. Then let us continue...** _

End
file.